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ABSTRACT

A two-fold statistical analysis examined the creative development of the 15-second television commercial, providing a follow-up to a similar study conducted in 1986. Study 1 of the present analysis examined 335 actual 15-second spots extracted from 30 hours of network daytime and primetime programming in the fourth and first quarters of 1988-1989. Each spot was analyzed for product category, message objective, creative format, and structure. Results indicated that food products and fast food chains, personal care and cosmetics, and over-the-counter medicines are the products most used in 15-second commercials. In study 2, a 17-item questionnaire solicited the executive opinions of 300 major advertising agencies' creative directors who write and produce 15-second spots. The overall consensus of creative directors is that production technique is second to the creative idea. Directors indicated that package goods are best suited for 15-second commercials, followed by automobiles and beverages. Findings provide insights to the creative evolution of the 15-second television commercial and the impact of the shorter time frame upon creative development and production. (Nine tables of data are included; 22 references are attached.) (MG)

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The Creative Evolution of the 15-second Television Commercial: Creative Structure and Impact Upon the Shorter Message Format

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The Creative Evolution of the 15-second Television Commercial: Creative Structure and Impact Upon the Shorter Message Format

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Abstract

A two-fold statistical analysis examines the creative development of the 15-second television commercial, providing a follow-up to a similar study conducted in 1986. Study I of this analysis examines 335 actual 15-second spots extracted from 30 hours of network daytime and primetime programming in the fourth and first quarters of 1988-1989. Study II examines the executive opinions of 300 creative directors in major advertising agencies who write and produce :15s. This report provides insights to the creative evolution of the 15-second television commercial, the impact of the shorter time frame upon creative development and production.

The Creative Evolution of the 15 Second Television Commercial: Creative Structure and Impact Upon the Shorter Message Format

This is a study of the creative evolution of the 15-second television commercial. It is a larger and more comprehensive follow-up to a study conducted by this researcher in 1986. At that time the networks opened the way for the stand-alone 15-second commercial. A study of 600 creative directors and broadcast production managers was conducted. The research revealed insights and predictions related to the 15-second spot's creative structure, formats, and production techniques imposed by the shorter time frame.

The current research combines two studies: one, a study of the actual 15-second television spots in use as aired in thirty hours of network daytime and primetime programming in the fourth and first quarters of 1988 and 1989; and two, a study of 300 creative directors in major market advertising agencies managing national accounts who write and produce 15-second spots.

This two-fold study provides insights relevant to the creative development and actual creative formats presently in use for the 15-second television commercial. It also explores the creative evolution of the 15-second spot through executive opinions related to creative development and restrictions experienced in their use.

As a point of reference, the 1986 study and its results are reviewed:

1986 15-second Television Study and Results

In 1986, a random sample of 600 creative directors and broadcast production managers in America's top ten advertising markets were surveyed using a 55-item questionnaire. Included were questions related to creative time spent with the :15, :30, and :60, as well as rankings for preferred, effective, structural formats; rankings for their perceived least effective formats: and 25 opinion statements related to perceived and predicted impact the 15-second spot would have upon creative development, objectives, structural formats, and production techniques.

In that study 72% of the respondents indicated experience with the 15-second, although the amount of time spent developing :15s was considerably less than :30s or :60s. In fact, most creative director's spent less than 25% of their time producing the shorter spot, as represented by the following chart.

1986 Creative Directors Time Spent with :15s

Percentage of time spent	*:15s*	*:30s*	*:60s*
0 to 5% of creative time	34.6%	1.7%	68.3%
5 to 10% of creative time	34.1%	2.6%	15.9%
10 to 25% of creative time	19.5%	2.2%	7.0%
25 to 50% of creative time	11.4%	14.8%	4.8%
50 to 75% of creative time	.5%	28.8%	1.9%
75 to 100% of creative time	.9%	49.8%	2.2%

At that time, and with their limited experience producing 15-second spots, creative directors were asked to indicate the most effective structural formats for the shorter spot. Respondents indicated their preferred formats were first, humorous; second, spokesperson; third, vignette; and fourth, demonstration.

The same respondents indicated the formats least effective for the :15 were first, storyline; second, vignette; third, animated; and fourth, spokesperson.

Most Effective Formats	Least Effective Formats
1. Humorous	1. Storyline
2. Spokesperson	2. Vignette
3. Vignette	3. Animated
4. Demonstration	4. Spokesperson

In the 1986 study, 76% said creative formats and production techniques would be impacted by the shorter format, particularly in view of the competition for audience and the clutter imposed by breaks with up to eight spots.

Also, 96% of the participants indicated a 15–second spot would save neither time nor money to

produce. Half said it would not save time in the chain of approval necessary to get a spot on the air.

When asked for the 15-second spot's most important task or objective, the 1986 respondents indicated **recall was the most important function of the spot.** In fact, **recall of brand name** was more important than brand image and content information. Also, these original participants indicated **key benefits of the product** were important; in fact, more important than product image. They also indicated **action would be focused on one key point** in :15s. Moreover, **products would have more focus than users** in the :15s there creative directors would produce.

In this original study, executives said **target appeals** would be emphasized over sensory appeals, but **visual appeals** would remain important. **Music would be used less often, words used sparingly,** and **voice overs used less** often than actual spokespersons.

Lifestyle commercials were predicted to be replaced by **spokesperson** and **product-alone** spots. However, **spokesperson** and **demonstration** commercials would not be replaced by product-alone spots. The creative directors and production managers in the 1986 study also predicted **celebrities as spokespersons would be used less often.**

These original respondents said new formats and production techniques would develop to accommodate the 15-second spot. They predicted visual and sound techniques would develop to grab attention and break clutter; however, these spots would not resemble MTV or price-product spots. They did not envision shorter and shorter cuts, but did predict user appeals would take precedence over sensory appeals. Entertainment values in the :15 would take precedence over information values. Predicted changes for the 15-second spot did not mean more simple production techniques.

In conclusion, the 1986 study indicated the 15-second television commercial would demand more simple single-minded messages and creative approaches. Key benefit, action focused on one key point, and simple structural formats such as spokesperson, demonstration, and product-alone spots would be emphasized more than spots which emphasized lifestyle, brand image, or sensory appeals. Enhanced production techniques would accompany this need for simple, single-minded messages, especially since recall would be the primary function of the 15-second spot.

The 1988 - 1989 Study

The purpose of this paper is a follow-up to the original study and more importantly to examine the 15-second spot in actual practice, determining the impact upon creative structure, creative format, and production techniques. The present research encompasses two studies: one, the analysis of 335 15-second spots extracted from 30 hours of network daytime and primetime programming in the fourth and first quarters of 1988 and 1989; and second, an analysis of the executive opinions of 300 creative directors who currently write and produce 15-second spots.

Study I: The Actual Spots Aired

The 335 spots analyzed in this study were video taped from 30 hours of programming viewed on network television, both daytime and primetime, during the fourth and first quarters of 1988 and 1989. These spots represented 44.7% of all commercials seen in daytime and 34.9% of all commercials aired in primetime in the selected programming of the fourth quarter of 1988, and 33.6% of daytime commercials and 31.5% of primetime commercials viewed in the selected programming of the first quarter. All other spots were :30s, with some :20s and :10s. The study percentage does not include network or local :03 or :05 IDs.

Each spot was analyzed for product category, message objective, creative format and structure.

The categories for products included **household goods and cleaners, food and fast food chains, business and service companies, personal care and cosmetics, over-the-counter medicines, automobiles, clothing, entertainment, military, network self-promotionals, toys, beverages (wine, beer and soda), and household appliances.** The following chart represents the product categories and the percentage of the 335 spots related to each product category.

Study I: Actual Spots Viewed and Product Categories

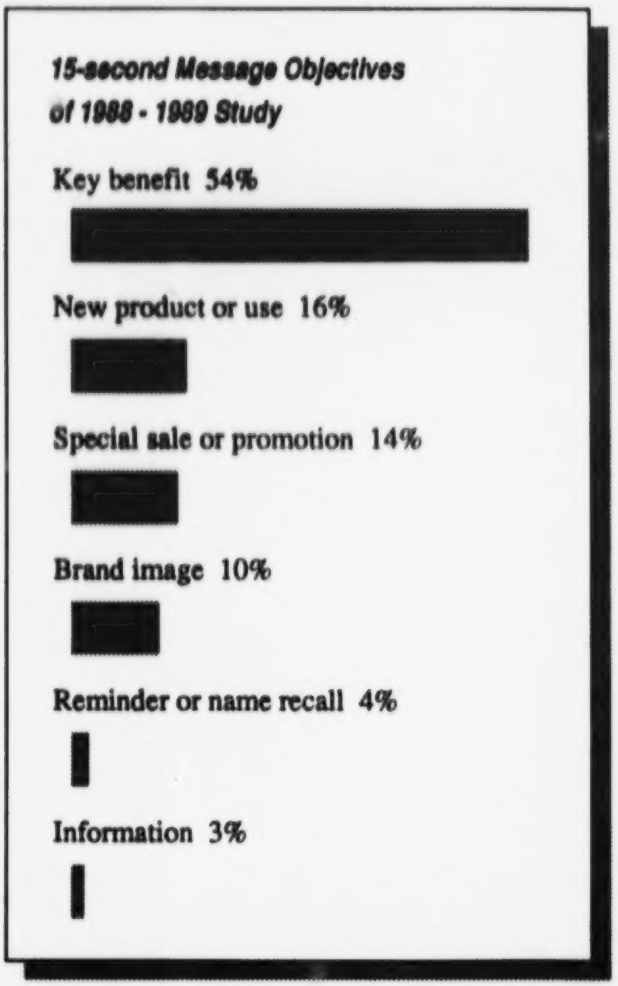
Product Category	% of :15s broadcast	Daytime	Primetime	4th Quarter	1st Quarter
Food, fast food chains	31.3%	35.8%	27.2%	31.5%	31.1%
Personal care, cosmetics	17.0%	22.2%	12.1%	15.0%	20.0%
Over-the-counter medicines	16.1%	19.8%	12.7%	13.5%	20.0%
Household goods, cleaners	7.8%	6.2%	9.2%	8.0%	7.4%
Network promotionals	7.2%	6.8%	7.5%	7.0%	7.4%
Clothing	6.6%	1.2%	7.5%	4.5%	5.9%
Entertainment, movies	4.5%	4.3$	6.9%	2.5%	5.2%
Automobiles	3.6%	.0%	6.9%	2.5%	5.2%
Business, services	2.4%	1.2%	3.5%	3.0%	1.5%
Toys	1.5%	.6%	2.3%	2.5%	.0%
Household appliances	1.2%	1.2%	1.2%	1.5%	.7%
Beverages, soda, beer	.6%	.6%	.6%	1.0%	.0%
Military	.3%	.0%	.6%	.5%	.0%

Some shifting of product categories exists over dayparts and quarter. For example, personal care and cosmetic products appeared in more daytime commercials than primetime. Over-the-counter medicine ads increased in the first quarter as did entertainment / movie commercials and personal care items.

As an overall assessment of the 335 spots, 162 or 48.4% were broadcast in daytime and 173 or 51.6% were aired in primetime. The fourth quarter represented 59.7% of the commercials studied and 40.3% were viewed in the first quarter of 1989. Computer cross tabulation indicates fourth quarter daytime included 58.6% of the spots studied and first quarter daytime 41.4%. Primetime fourth quarter represented 60.7% of the spots studied and primetime first quarter 39.3%.

Each spot was analyzed for its key function or objective. The categories of creative objectives included key benefit, new product or product uses, special sale or promotion, brand image, reminder or name recall, and information. The following chart indicates the percentage of spots aired and their primary creative objective.

The spots were also examined for their creative or structural formats including the following categories: **demonstration, spokesperson, product alone, problem-solution, product in use, humor, slice of life, vignette (imagery), storyline, comparison, and graphics dominated.**

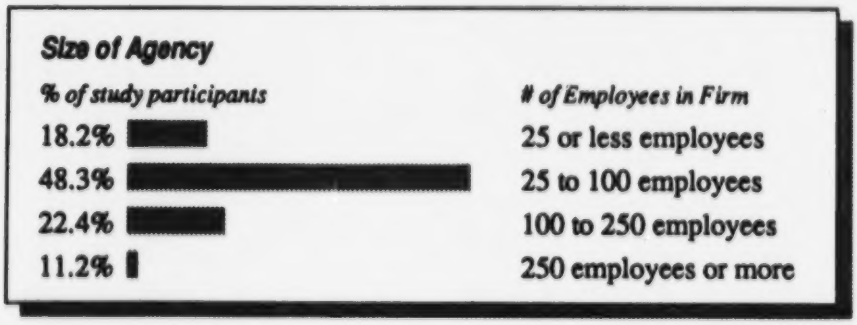


1988 - 1989 15-second Commercial Creative Formats Most Used

Creative Format	Rank	% used	Daytime	Primetime	4th Quarter	1st Quarter
Demonstration	1	20.9%	22.8%	19.1%	22.5%	18.5%
Spokesperson	2	15.5%	17.3%	13.9%	13.5%	18.5%
Product alone	3	9.6%	10.5%	8.7%	5.0%	16.3%
Problem solution	4	9.3%	11.1%	7.5%	10.5%	7.4%
Product in use	5	7.5%	4.3%	10.4%	9.5%	4.4%
Humor	6	7.5%	5.6%	9.2%	7.5%	7.4%
Slice of life	7	7.2%	10.5%	4.0%	5.0%	7.2%
Vignette (lifestyle, users)	8	6.9%	8.6%	5.2%	6.9%	6.7%
Animation	9	3.9%	3.7%	4.0%	4.0%	3.7%
Price-product	10	3.6%	.6%	6.4%	6.05	.0%
Vignette (imagery)	11	3.3%	.6%	5.8%	3.6%	3.3%
Storyline	12	2.7%	2.5%	2.9%	4.5%	.0%
Comparison	13	1.8%	1.9%	1.7%	.5%	3.7%
Graphics dominated	14	.6%	.0%	1.2%	1.0%	.0%

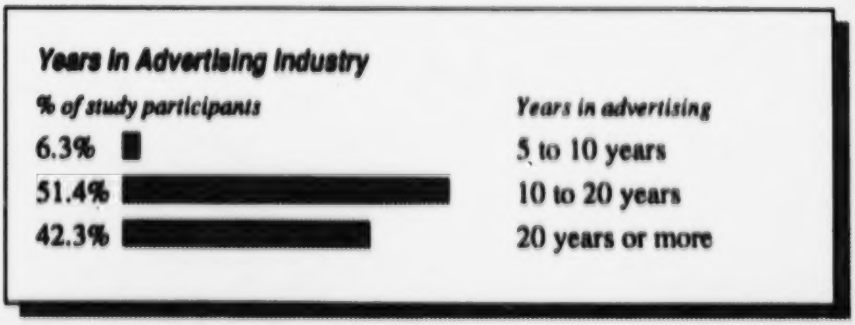
Study II: Creative Directors' Opinions

A 17-item questionnaire was sent to 300 creative directors randomly selected from a list purchased through the Standard Directory of National Advertising Agencies. Included were questions related to the amount of time creative directors spent producing 15-second commercials, their ranking of the most effective creative formats, the best suited product categories, and open ended questions asking these creative directors about the process of creating :15s, changes perceived in production techniques, difficulties and restrictions in writing :15s, and their ranking of the most effective 15-second commercials broadcast to date.



The respondents represented five advertising regions and the percentage of those participating in the study included 31.5% from the West and Southwest, primarily Los Angeles, Seattle, San Francisco, Portland, and San Diego; 26.6% from New York and Northeast, including Boston and Philadelphia; 20.3% from the South and Texas (including Dallas); 11.2% from the Southeast and Florida, Miami and Atlanta; and 7.0% representing the Midwest, primarily Chicago and Minnesota. Approximately 2.1% represented agencies in the Rocky Mountain region.

The creative directors in this study represent medium to large agencies handling national accounts and billing at least $8 million.



Years in Creative Management

% of study participants	years in creative management
21.1%	1 to 5 years
40.1%	5 to 10 years
33.1%	10 to 20 years
5.6%	20 years or more

All respondents in the 1988 - 1989 study are creating 15-second commercials. The greatest percentage (67.3%) are spending 10% or less of their time making :15s. A fifth of all participants (20.7%) are spending 10 to 25% of their time developing these spots. Only 4.7% devote 25 to 50 % of their time to :15s, 1.3% are spending from 50 to 75% of their creative time on :15s.

When asked to name the product category best suited for :15s, the creative directors in this study indicate **packaged goods** as best suited for 15-second television commercials. Interestingly, Study I's research indicates food products and food chains, followed by personal care and cosmetic products, and over-the-counter medicine products are most often seen in actual spots aired.

Creative Directors' Product Choices for :15s

Product Category	Rank	Percent Choosing
Packaged goods	1	70.1%
Automobiles	2	16.1%
Beverages (beer, wine, soda)	3	8.0%
Cosmetics, personal care	4	3.4%
Household goods, cleaners	5	2.3%

Over half of the respondents indicate the creative development of a 15-second spot is **not** the same process as creating a :30. **They tell us in 1989 a :15 is by nature more of an announcement than a commercial. Use of emotion, humor, and dialogue must be to the point, that verbal economy and simplicity are what they strive for.** Following are some of their comments:

"Fifteens require a greater compression of subject profile and motivation elements and allow little time for story development."

"Fifteens must be approached as posters dealing with one point. There is no time to develop such dramatic issues as mood, characterization, storyline, dramatic posing, etc."

"A :30 has a beginning, middle, and end; a :15 only has an end. A :30 is like a full page print ad; a :15 is like an outdoor billboard. :10s and :15s are just a glance and a smile without time for conversation."

Related to the question of creative process, the difference in creative development of a :15 compared to a :30, these creative directors in 1988 - 1989 indicate :15s must be "exceedingly simple and distill even further the basic advertising idea." Respondents tell us the selling proposition must be distilled for quicker perception and memorability they say.

In 1988 - 1989, with two years of experience creating 15-second commercials, creative directors indicate **the most effective creative formats are first,**

1988 - 1989 Creative Directors' Choice of Most Important Objectives for a :15

Rank	Objective	% selecting as 1st choice	% selecting as 2nd choice	% selecting as 3rd choice
1	Recall of brand name	61.8%	26.4%	5.9%
2	Key benefit or benefits	21.3%	49.6%	15.4%
3	Seeing the product in use	3.7%	3.9%	27.9%
4	Exciting imagery, sensory appeals	3.7%	10.1%	16.9%
5	Informational content	1.5%	1.6%	27.0%

product demonstration; second, product alone; third, spokesperson, fourth, vignette (imagery); and fifth, vignette (product user/lifestyle). In comparison their choices for 1986 were humor, spokesperson, and vignette. *A demonstration commercial was their fourth choice in 1986 for an effective format.*

In comparison, the study of 335 actual spots indicates the creative formats most used are demonstration, spokesperson, and product alone.

Respondents were asked to indicate the 15-second commercial's most important objectives. They indicate the following:

The objectives most used in the 335 actual spots of this study are key benefit, new product or uses, special sale or promotion, and brand image. Interestingly, name recall and reminder appeared to be the central objective in only 4% of the spots.

Creative directors in this study indicate the Idea is the most important element in developing a 15-second spot no matter what the creative format or objective. In fact, their remarks provide valuable insight:

"The idea is the thing."

"The idea should be good first, then communicate it."

"It's not the time frame, it's the idea. The goal is to have a good idea then worry about the time frame."

"You have to have a good idea."

"The goal is to look for the simplest form of message. Dress it in a big idea. Then worry about embellishments. In 15 seconds, there's less opportunity for embellishment, but greater opportunity for hard-hitting punch."

"A good concept owes itself to a good simple idea that can usually be expressed in 15 seconds or less."

Besides the overriding challenge for developing a good idea, these creative directors indicate the need for more careful plotting and development of a 15-second spot. Every detail must count they tell us:

"...you must have a point made with more punch, more visual, less words."

"The shorter time frame is so critical, it dominates your thinking."

"A :15 simply needs to be simpler, more concise, more telegraphic in its effectiveness and perhaps more focused, single-minded in message or selling point."

"You have to work harder to keep the message simple and visual."

"Trying to entertain and sell in :15s is a good deal more difficult."

"The creative process takes longer"

Idea and careful attention to detail are important, but these creative directors point out the restrictive nature of the time frame. A 15-second commercial is less forgiving of error and digression. Says one CD, "they reward discipline and selectivity, and punish the greedy and ambivalent."

Others remarked:

"When there are no real product differences, which is usually the case, the shorter format does not permit adequate time to promote a brand character, or emotional reason to purchase."

"The :15 can make only one selling point at best. Therefore, it is a rational sell length — not an emotional sell length. What it does best is brand registration."

"Since :15s do not allow time for a story to unfold, concepts must be quicker and simple focusing on messages which are concise and easy to understand. Setup time goes out the window and key ingredients to creating an effective :15 spot by concept, creative are great."

And one creative director astutely noted:

"The creative thinking must be more focused. Discipline must be exercised so the concept focuses on one, and only one central point. Visually the concept must be able to quickly capture the central

focal point you want to emphasize and avoid confusing the viewer. The copy especially the tag line should also work quickly and hopefully be memorable as well. The 15-second spot is no place for drawn out story lines or a series of complicated scenes."

Creative directors in the study were asked to list specifically the elements which they had to cut in creating 15-second spots.

They indicate they have cut the following elements:

When asked if the 15-second commercial has impacted production techniques, specifically in the area of photography, editing, sound effects, graphics, animation, special effects or music, most indicated they did not perceive any real changes, "You need the same equipment for both." Comments provided by these creative directors are revealing:

15-second Spot Elements Which are Cut

Copy, copy points	Suspense, mystery	Jargon
Mood	Ambience	Fluff
Dialogue	Explanation	Fun stuff
Set up	Repetition	Excess baggage
Plots, storyline	Nuance	Glitz
Character buildup	Surprises	Jingle format
Extravagant development	Flashbacks	Frills
Emotion	Titles, supers	Details
Multiple locations	Music intros	Reasons why
Imagery	Corporate graphics	The crap
Music	ID sign offs	Adverbs, adjectives
Entertainment value	Legal qualifiers	Production
Humor	Non-sound time	Expensive production
Atmosphere	Long shots	Copy, period
Brand personality	On camera announcers	Time

"The dominant factor in a 15-second spot is the idea or central concept, not the technical wizardry available to execute it. Technique follows thought, not vice versa."

"It's not the technique, it's the concept that determines the effectiveness of a commercial."

"All production techniques can be applied to a :15. The important thing is the strength and simplicity of the idea."

"To some extent, techniques aid in communication — but the idea is still the most important."

"Techniques are of secondary importance to ideas, no matter what the length."

":60s, :30s, or :15s take the same amount of preproduction, production, and post production, no matter which of the above you include or exclude."

In the 1988 - 1989 study, the overall concensus of creative directors is that production technique is secondary to a creative idea. One respondent noted:

"People who can't get an idea have always relied on production techniques to save the day. They will continue to do so, no matter the length of the spot. However, they'll be more likely to fail with a :15 because there's less opportunity to hide."

Only a handful of respondents indicated a substantial impact on production techniques, brought on by the 15-second spot, and this was in the area of editing.

"You choose more carefully"

"It's got to happen quick — more like a video poster than a film. Certain production techniques can help you achieve this."

"It takes as much thinking about music, sound effects, photography as any other format because it

has to work instantly — people don't have time to wonder. Everything has to be integrated perfectly. No loose ends."

"It limits the amount of mediocre material that can be put into a commercial and forces the choice of the most impactful and telegraphic in editing the spot."

"Each shot must work. Each element must work in harmony. There is little time to build emotion. You must create emotion instantly."

":15s may lead to more use of the lexicon, a machine that uses a computer to condense audio and or video. If :15s are done properly this shouldn't be needed."

"It has substantially impacted the people behind the technology."

Overall, the creative directors in this 1988 - 1989 study indicate **idea, simple message, exciting visuals, crisp pacing, careful editing, and sharper focus are critical to an effective 15-second commercial. The compression of time makes the creative executive work harder to develop a concept that can sell in a shorter span of time. Against this challenge is the desire to break clutter and grab the attention of the viewer with a message which is concise and easy to understand.**

Creative directors were asked in a final open-ended question to name their three favorite 15-second spots. First choice among :15s was Excedrin, followed by ads for Nynex Yellow Pages, and the "frying egg" spot for A Drug Free America campaign. Other spots which received favorable recognition were for Black and Decker skill tools, Phillips Light Bulbs, Nikon One Touch Camera, Volkswagen, Nissan Trucks, Federal Express, California Cooler, and Northwest Airlines.

Some could not name a 15-second spot. Said one creative director, "See how great they are? I can't think of any!" Another noted, "Frankly, none seem to come to mind. Maybe that says something about the rarity of excellent :15s."

From this author's point of view it is very difficult to separate the :15s from :30s in a commercial pod without a stop watch. They blend in with the other messages in a station break. It is a fascinating experience to realize how a compressed message can seem as "big" as one twice as long, just by careful presentation of product, selling point, and product details.

Conclusion of the 1988 - 1989 Study of the Creative Evolution of the 15-second commercial:

Creative directors indicate packaged goods are best suited for :15s, followed by automobiles and beverages. They tell us the most effective creative formats for :15s are product demonstration, product alone and spokesperson. Less effective, but still recommended are vignettes, both imagery and product users/lifestyle. Creative directors indicate the most important objective for a :15 is the recall of brand name followed by the product's key benefit. These advertising executives stress idea over technique and careful selection of elements in a spot. The creative development of a 15-second spot is more difficult and demanding than a :30; and the challenge of creating a simple, focused, impactful commercial is ever present. The one production technique which has been impacted by the shorter spot is editing.

Overall, creative directors have made a substantial move to creating demonstration spots with voice-overs, a difference in the 1986 study which indicated such formats as humor, spokesperson, and vignette would be their first choices. Then too, any predictions for the use of celebrities has not panned out. In fact of the 52 spokesperson spots involved in the 335 spots of this study, only 16 were presented by celebrities. These included celebrities such as Wilford Brimley, Martha Ray, Jane Seymour, Pernell Roberts, and Cybill Shepherd.

Jingles and music have taken a back seat to crisp visuals and the product in use in demonstration spots. Overall, the cuts involved in 15-second vignette commercials are not shorter but more selective and telling.

Voice-overs supporting a visual presentation of the product seem to be the most dominant form of commercial seen in the group of 335 :15s. The problem-solution format and slice of life format demonstrate the most visible display of shot selection and

editing, especially since these formats tell a story in 15 seconds.

Creative directors have learned how to cut out many elements in their 15-second spots, including copy, mood, set up, plot, multiple locations, characterization, multiple selling points, atmosphere, intrigue and emotion.

The study of 335 actual broadcast 15-second commercials indicates food products and fast food chains; personal care and cosmetics; and over-the-counter medicines are the products most used in :15s. Of some significance are household goods and cleaners, network promotionals, and clothing. The above product categories make up 85% of all :15s studied in 1988 - 1989. Entertainment spots, movie promos, automobiles, business and services, toys, household appliances, beverages, and military ads make up the other 15%.

Daytime programming carries more :15s than primetime and the fourth quarter broadcast more :15s than the first.

The most popular creative formats used in the 335 spots analyzed were demonstration, spokesperson and product alone followed by problem-solution, and product in use. The major objectives of 15-second spots in the study of actual spots reveals the focus on the product's key benefit, first; the presentation of a new product or product use, second; and, special sale or promotions as the third most important objective.

Further Research

While it is difficult to spot a :15 in a commercial pod, it is just as overwhelming to realize that at least a third of all network commercials are :15s and in high pressure times, up to half of all network spots are :15s, depending upon daypart and quarter.

No doubt the creative development and production techniques will continue to evolve. This fact alone would require the continued study of the creative techniques used for a shorter mass communication message. Then too, the impact of the 15-second commercial for childrens' products is unexplored.

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